

“Tell me.”
 “Guess.”
 “No more games.”
 “Entertainment, remember? There really are only my games here. I’ll reward you.”

“How?”
 “Trust that I will. I’ll give you a clue. We were not necessarily royalty. Not rulers.”

It did intrigue him. “Another caste in your society?”
 “In a sense. Go on.”

Beni fought to think pressured by the changeless, vitreous dark by the unchanging yellow fan of his lamp showing not the tholos but only more and more corridor, its glow whitened by the added glow of the figure floating, standing beside him, seeming to.

Tholos, maze, wherever he was, the intercept really did seem to want an answer.

“Our culture is 500 years after yours,” he said.

“Good. Yes?”

“But” – he hated saying it – “is debased by comparison. Technologically.”

“Such finesse, little hunter.”

“You belonged to a scientist caste.”

“Wrong.”

“A holy order. Priests. Sacerdotes.”

“No.”

“Criminals being punished.”

“Fool!” She said it with incredible fury. The black eyes glittered. “Don’t you know any history? What happened to our culture?”

Beni was stunned by her vehemence, the unconcealed contempt. It told him something he did not yet understand.

“You vanished,” he said, and then, to show he did know some history, what Ramirez had told him, added: “Like the Mayans. The Anasazi. Your cities were abandoned, allowed to run down; most were reduced to slag by housekeeping programs...”

“So where did we go? Our millions? Our millions, Beni?”

What did she want him to say? And millions. The Tasthan millions.

“Into these tombs?” The certainty of it amazed him. “All coded in. Immortal. You’re the guardians of your race! Eighty-five repositories but housing millions.”

Arasty’s expression may have been the result of holistic psychonic printing or just some simulated response selected from a housekeeping menu, but Beni saw what looked like genuine scorn, genuine revulsion. If it were a deception then it was a subtle one, something naked, seeming spontaneous, well beyond the disapproval and impatience it resembled.

What am I missing? Beni asked himself, and with it felt a conviction. She needs me to guess. It really is important that I do. But what did she – it – want him to say? He wanted to shout the question. Didn’t dare now. All he could think of was to show humility, self-effacement, and hope for patience.

“Please, Arasty, help me more. This is important.” He hoped the compliment, his respectful tone, would do it.

The phantom watched him sidelong with her dark eyes just as a human would, as if in fact a discrete

entity deciding, not a defence intercept scanning precedents, selecting options.

“You really have no idea, do you? A great culture, possibly the greatest the world has known, reaches a point where it dismantles itself, gives way to a simpler, let’s say impoverished, less sophisticated successor. Why would they do it?”

“I can only think of two answers,” he said quickly, honestly. “There was some enemy...”

“You could say that.” The intercept’s eyes flashed with interest. “Or?”

“You gained by it. It had to be progress. Something you saw as better.”

And he remembered what she’d said – impoverished – and barely dared utter the words. “You became *us!*” Remembered what else she’d said: less sophisticated. “You simplified your culture, someone did, something, some ruling elite maybe, and became us...”

“Yes.” There was something like madness in the phantom’s darkling bits of eyes, something reckless and fervent, but Beni dared not suggest the tombs housed what remained of the Tasthan’s dead insane. It was more. It had to be more. But he did not have to stumble over words to form a question. Arasty continued speaking.

“Some ruling elite, yes. An enemy, true, that culled our millions and our cultural heritage. Downgraded us all. To simple, immortal, happy folk like you...”

“Then...”

“Immortal. Happy ichneumon. But able to be maimed, killed by violence. With time to be curious, to ponder, to forget, to indulge. Happy, happy, happy ichneumon!”

“Then you’re here...”

“Go on!” Madness spun in the darkness of the eyes.

“To cull us! Prey on us! To give purpose to immortal lives! They planned ahead. Saw we would need...”

“No!” The intercept had halted in blazing fury, actually flickered, flashed off and back again. The face was rigid with a rage and suffering held in such perfect suspension that Beni was faint with the involuntary numbing terror he felt welling up. The eyes, the black false eyes, held him.

“No, little hunter. No. See it our way. To give purpose to *our* thwarted lives. Some kind of revenge for those few among the elite, 85 out of all those many, to whom the genetic treatments did *not* bestow immortality. Who had helped cull and simplify, then found themselves without the intended blessing, left to die in the agony of exclusion from that. From you.”

Beni saw the extent of the resolve, the old fierce hatred, that she would never let him go. He would never get to tell this story. Never even reach the central chamber. Or know he had.

“These aren’t tombs. They’re traps,” he said, understanding, remembering the other meaning to her name for him, the insect leaving behind its offspring to feed.

“Yes, Beni. Traps to lure immortals curious in their long lives. A way of striking back at time.”

And Beni felt the deep-down dread that Ramirez, some kind of Ramirez, tampered with, changed, or no

The Widest Windows onto the New: A Tribute to Judith Merrill

At the end of the 1960s

American sf writer

and editor Judith

Merril left the USA for

Canada, donating her large

collection of books and

magazines to Toronto Public

Library and giving up all her

activities in the sf genre. The

department she endowed, now

known as the Merrill Collection, still

flourishes (and has a subscription to

Interzone!), and Merrill herself still lives

in Canada. In 1992 the Canadian

magazine Aloud invited Jim Ballard to

write a short tribute to Judith Merrill,

which we’re glad to reprint here.

When I visited Toronto in 1987 to give a reading at the International Festival of Authors, I saw Judy for the first time in 20 years. I was delighted to find that she was the same fascinating figure I had got to know in London in the Swinging Sixties: strong-willed and combative, sensitive and astute, quick to quarrel and forgive, the shrewdest judge of fiction, fearless exposé of humbug and pretension and capable of surprising shifts into a positively feline femininity that could be quite disorienting. I’m sorry that she exiled herself from the USA at the height of the Vietnam war, when she might have had some influence for the good on American science fiction during its crucial years of change in the 1970s. And she and I might well have seen more of each other. But the loss to American sf was Toronto’s gain.

Judy and I first met in London in 1966, but I’d been well aware of her powerful presence for the previous ten years. Late in 1956, soon after publish-